

The Life of the Spirit and the Power of Resurrection

Psalm 130 *O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with God is great power to redeem.*

Ezekiel 37:1-14 *I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.*

John 11:1-45 *Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and here sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

If we have been reading and working with the scripture lessons for each of these Sundays in Lent, we will recognize today a shift in tone and message. Lent has been a time of reflection and self-examination in light of Christ's call to discipleship. It has been a time of taking up with new resolve our spiritual disciplines, putting away things that are barriers to our relationship with God and taking on those things that enable us to draw nearer to God. But with our readings today, the focus shifts from us to God, from what we do to what God does and is doing in the depths of life to bring new life to us and the world. We begin to hear the message of resurrection.

Can These Bones Live?

The reading from Ezekiel is one of the most familiar in the Bible. If nothing else, we know it through the old spiritual "Dem Bones Gonna Rise Again." You may have sung it at church camp.

The historical setting is Israel's exile in Babylon. Ezekiel may have been among the first of those taken away from the Southern Kingdom into exile (about 597 BCE). The people are being torn from their sacred land, city and temple. There is this radical feeling of dislocation. The most painful issue for Israel is not a physical but a spiritual one. They had so identified God's presence with them where they were that they cannot imagine God's presence with them where they are.

Ezekiel is led by God's spirit to a valley strewn with human bones. It is the site of some battle, probably some great defeat. The text emphasizes the condition of the bones—they are VERY dry. There is no life and no possibility of life. The situation is hopeless. Nothing on the human side can do anything about it.

God asks the prophet: "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel is no dummy. He knows that the situation is hopeless from the human side. Yet he also knows enough to know that God is the ultimate answer. God is that mysterious beyond that borders and underlies human life. So Ezekiel puts the question back where it belongs—"O Lord God, you know."

God tells Ezekiel to speak to the bones the word of God. He is to tell the bones that God says breath will come and they will live. They will have muscle and flesh and the breath of life. Ezekiel speaks God's word to the

bones, and in an eerie scene the bones rattle and join up together. Muscle and tendons and skin cover them again.

But something is missing. The bodies exist, but there is no LIFE. God tells the prophet to speak to the wind, the breath, the spirit—these are all from the same Hebrew word *ruach*. And the wind comes. The breath enters the corpses and they are truly alive. The scene echoes the story of the creation of the man in Genesis 2. God makes the man out of the mud of the earth, but the man is not a "living being" (*nephesh*) until God breathes into him. It is the breath, the wind, the spirit of God that makes us really alive. This is what connects us with God.

Now, says God, this is what I will do for Israel, my people. They feel completely dead, utterly lost and alone. But I am not just in Jerusalem or in the temple. I am with them in their exile. There is no geographical, physical, or spiritual condition that is a barrier to my presence, my spirit.

This is a resurrection story. Resurrection is not just a New Testament thing. The God who raised Jesus from death is the God who breathed hope and new life into Israel even in exile. It is the God of spirit whose power to revive us is not limited by any circumstance we are in as individuals, a community of faith, a nation or a world. The story reminds us of the God beyond our limited vision and assessment of things, the God whose breath is waiting to come into us again. And so we must learn, when faced with hopelessness, to respond to God's question—"Mortal, can these bones live?"—in the way Ezekiel did: "O God, you know." You see, faith is precisely NOT KNOWING. It is the honest and humble awareness that we have no idea whether new life is possible or not. And so we do the only thing we can do. We keep being as faithful as we can be and turn it over to God. All we know is what we have heard, that word of promise and new life. So we neither give in to despair nor sail into a false optimism. We face the reality of our situation and we learn to wait.

Waiting for the Morning

Waiting is the theme of Psalm 130. The psalmist is where Israel was, where we are at times--in the depths of discouragement, despair, depression. Ready to give up on ourselves, others, the world. From everything we've seen it is useless, hopeless. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." There is no more authentically human voice in scripture than right here.

But the psalmist remembers God's mercy and forgiveness. He remembers that God is not a God who keeps score on us, who "marks iniquities." We are very good at keeping score on ourselves and each other, but we can't pin that one on God. With God there is forgiveness, the wiping clean of the slate, the eternal new beginning, the perpetual fresh start. The psalmist doesn't feel that yet, but he remembers that it is so. And he waits. "My soul waits for the Lord and in God's word I hope." The soul, the spirit, that central part of us that breathes the breath of God. It is now out of breath, feeling dead. But the psalmist remembers. He remembers God's word [*dabar*], God's living communication with us, the very energy that created the world and in the past gave Israel a way out of no-way.

The psalmist knows about the kind of waiting that neither despairs nor jumps to premature hopes. This kind of waiting faces the reality of the

situation that seems hopeless and at the same time keeps open a window somewhere. And through that window will come the wind, the breath, the spirit of God. The psalmist can wait in this way because he knows that “with God there is steadfast love, and with God is great power to redeem.” God never goes away even though it may feel like it. And God is the God of resurrection power, of life even when there seems to be no life at all.

We don't like waiting. It seems like doing nothing, and we are, if nothing else, great doers. We think that everything depends upon our doing something. We ARE called to doing, to lives of active faith. But our doing must flow from God's inner leading and be filled with God's spirit. Otherwise we only make things worse. We become activists who bring nothing with us of God's love, of God's power, only our own forcefulness and cleverness, and sometimes our thinly veiled despair or fear.

Waiting is an important spiritual discipline. It is one of the hardest. But this kind of waiting keeps us from falling completely into despair and keeps us open to God and what God will bring, that fresh wind, that renewing spirit, that new life. If we can learn to wait in this way, then we will develop not only a patience that sustains us and others around us, but also a sensitivity to the movements of God's spirit when they come. And come they will, if we are able to wait.

Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life

Finally, John's story of Jesus and his dying friend Lazarus. It is one peculiar story and fits very well alongside the story of those dry bones. There is a weirdness about it, with the scene at the tomb and Jesus' loud cry, “Lazarus, come out!” It can send chills up your spine.

But I don't think that's the most interesting thing about the story. To me, the way Jesus responds connects us with the psalmist's waiting on God. Jesus is in no hurry. He's told that his friend is dying. Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha are Jesus' dearest friends. What a catastrophe! Lazarus is dying and Jesus can do something about it. What does he do? “Accordingly,” says the text, “though Jesus loved Martha and here sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.” I know for a fact that if a minister did this, he or she would be called on the carpet at the least and dismissed at the most. Not only does Jesus stay where he is but he also tells the disciples that they are going to take a little mission trip to Judea.

Well, Jesus inexplicably changes his mind again. He decides to go to Bethany after all because “our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.” The disciples don't get it. Why does Jesus have to go to Bethany in order to wake Lazarus up? Doesn't Lazarus have an alarm clock? Jesus was talking about Lazarus' death, which somehow he knows has happened. The disciples haven't yet caught on to Jesus' figures of speech.

Jesus arrives at the scene four days after Lazarus' death. Martha rushes out to Jesus. Remember that she's the one who, in another story, was in the kitchen frustrated that her sister Mary was just sitting in the living room listening to Jesus. Martha's a real DOER. Lord, if you had been here sooner you could have done something about. But that's okay. I know you can DO SOMETHING about it now.

Jesus goes to the tomb. He breaks down in tears. I like this translation of the famed “shortest verse in the Bible.” “Jesus wept” just doesn't quite get it. The literal meaning is “break down in tears, “ nearly falling apart. Here Jesus is one with us in our grief, our feelings of being overcome by circumstances that happen in our lives. Jesus is like the psalmist who cries out of the depths. But there may be something else here. Looking at the tomb of his friend, the reality of death, maybe Jesus is seeing his own death. Maybe in his grief for Lazarus is his grief over his own mortality and the kind of death that lies ahead. We are like that, too. Our grief about someone's death or illness or predicament can get mixed up with our grief about our own lives.

But Jesus, like Ezekiel speaking to the bones, cries out to the dead man. And out comes Lazarus, smelly grave clothes and all. Jesus tells them to “unbind him and let him go.”

What strikes me about all this is Jesus' lack of urgency, his taking his time coming to Bethany. He is on a very different wavelength. He's focused on the work he has to do. That's why he stays where he is for two more days and then wants to go to Judea. He has this “let the dead bury the dead” attitude. There's something more real than death. There's something more important happening than the surface stuff that tends to throw us for a loop. And Jesus is tuned into that. He is aware that the life we live is shot through with another Life. And it is that Life that is most important. It is life infused with the spirit of God, the spirit that works in every situation to bring new life, the spirit that can make something out of the chaos we experience. Jesus lives as one who trusts that deeper reality and calls us to do so as well.

People of the Spirit

What might we make of all this? We are spiritual beings. That is what is most important. That is what we must pay attention to. We are also bodily, physical. It is a matter of what is prior, what is most essential. We can be alive, existing, but not living. We can live in this world without ever seeing it as the creation, infused with God's spirit. We can be so focused on physical security and comfort or so distraught by circumstances we face that we miss the deeper dimension. Our living can be merely going through the motions. Our actions can become only the outward expressions of our inward anxiety, anger or despair. But if we are working with our spiritual journeys, paying attention to that central part of us we call “soul” or “spirit,” then we become those who wait with hope and who act without anxiety. We become those who are able to do what God in Christ is calling us to do aware of that larger context of life—the mysterious and real power of life that envelopes us, those dear to us, and the whole creation.

As we live the life of the spirit, learning to wait with hope, learning to keep open that window through which the wind, the breath of God can blow, then we are able to stay with things, as difficult as they may be, until new life emerges. We become those who not only believe in but also are able to wait for and perceive the movements of God's power of resurrection. Though we may cry out from the depths, we look to the dawn that will surely come.